

Camping in Normans Bay
from the 1920s
A Short History

by

Ted Doswell

Normans Bay Residents' Association

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Canon C.W. Hutchinson 'Father Hutch'

Introduction

This story has been compiled with help from the history and log books of the Shaftesbury Homes and *Arethusa*, the Camping and Caravaning Club archives and supplemented by my own personal knowledge. This book is also written in thanks to the dedication of the volunteers, who gave up all their spare time to run the camp, and make a happy holiday for hundreds of young boys.

The camp staff were:

Rev. Hutchinson	—	the Commanding Officer
Bill Harrison	—	a cook
Lux Harrison (Bill's wife)	—	who ran the post office and tuck shop
Jack Harrison (Bill's brother)	—	cook and house helper
Charlie Shippam (Shippams Paste)	—	organiser of country hikes etc.
Louis Golding	—	an author and storyteller
Ned Doswell	—	caretaker and helper in camp construction
Ted Percival	—	business man also responsible for car rides etc.
Father Conway	—	a monk, general helper and entertainer
Paddy	—	the Irish lamp man
Dr. Farncome	—	who gave his time to tend the sick

There were many others whose names I never knew.

Ted Doswell

How it All Started

First we have to go back a few years, in fact to 1843 when a young solicitors clerk William Williams who had been badly crippled in his youth, was travelling by train to the West Country, when he heard a rowdy commotion in the compartment next to his. When he went to investigate, he was horrified to see about a dozen ragged young boys handcuffed and manacled together, on their way to Plymouth to be shipped to Australia. They had committed various misdemeanours in the slums of London where vice and crime abounded. There was no proper education and young children survived on their wits and their scavenging amongst the filth on the streets. On his return to London he gathered together a group of friends and in a hay loft over a cow shed in the notorious Seven Dials district around St. Giles, he set up one of the very first ragged schools.

It was not long before the work of William Williams and his friends came to the attention of Lord Shaftesbury, the Great Seventh Earl, a renowned companion for the rights of children. Shaftesbury himself had an unhappy childhood with a cold austere father who devoted himself to public life and neglected his children and a mother whose only interests were amongst fashionable society.

As a boy Lord Shaftesbury's only friend and companion was his nurse Maria Milles whom he loved dearly. She taught him the values of human friendship and compassion and instilled in him a strong religious belief.



The barn at Seven Dials

The National Refuge

Probably the most significant date in the history of what was then 'The National Refuges for Homeless and Destitute Children' was St Valentines day in 1866. Lord Shaftesbury provided a supper for the homeless boys in London at the Parker Street refuge near Covent Garden. Invitations were sent to all the casual wards of workhouses for waifs and strays who cared to attend.

Some four hundred were invited, but there seemed to be a good deal of suspicion about the purpose of the supper and anxiety that a trap might be being laid for them. In the event about three hundred turned up and enjoyed a meal of roast beef and plum pudding for probably the first time in their lives. As the last plate was licked clean, Lord Shaftesbury addressed the boys saying 'Supposing that there were in the Thames, a big ship large enough to contain a thousand boys, would you like to be placed on board to be taught a trade or trained for the Navy and Merchant Service?'

The Chichester Training Ship

The Morning Herald of February 15, 1866 reports that:

'A forest of upraised hands settled these alternatives in the affirmative'.

So it was with this simple market research behind him, Lord Shaftesbury approached his friends in the Admiralty and

persuaded them to lend him the redundant fifty gun frigate *Chichester*, which he arranged to be berthed at Greenhithe. She was inaugurated on December 18, 1866 with fifty boys, sent to join from the three hundred and sixty, who were at the time, living in the Parker Street refuge. A committee was formed and a Captain Alston elected to take charge of the ship.

During 1867 the number on board increased to one hundred and thirty four, and the annual for that year states that the value of the training ship cannot be overstated because, as it says:

'the eagerness which is manifested by the volunteers for the ship is not surprising, for anyone at all familiar with the tastes and habits of these boys knows how very strongly they are influenced by the spirit of adventure, and where such spirits find better scope, and a more congenial atmosphere than a seafaring life. Thus proving beyond controversy, that this is the very class out of which some good, useful, true British Jack tars can be manufactured.'

It was not surprising, therefore, to read later in the report, that:

'no pressure or persuasion of any kind is resorted to, to induce the lads to adopt a seafaring life.'

The *Chichester* was kept in service until 1889 when she was sold for scrap, as she was leaking badly and was too old to warrant a major refit.

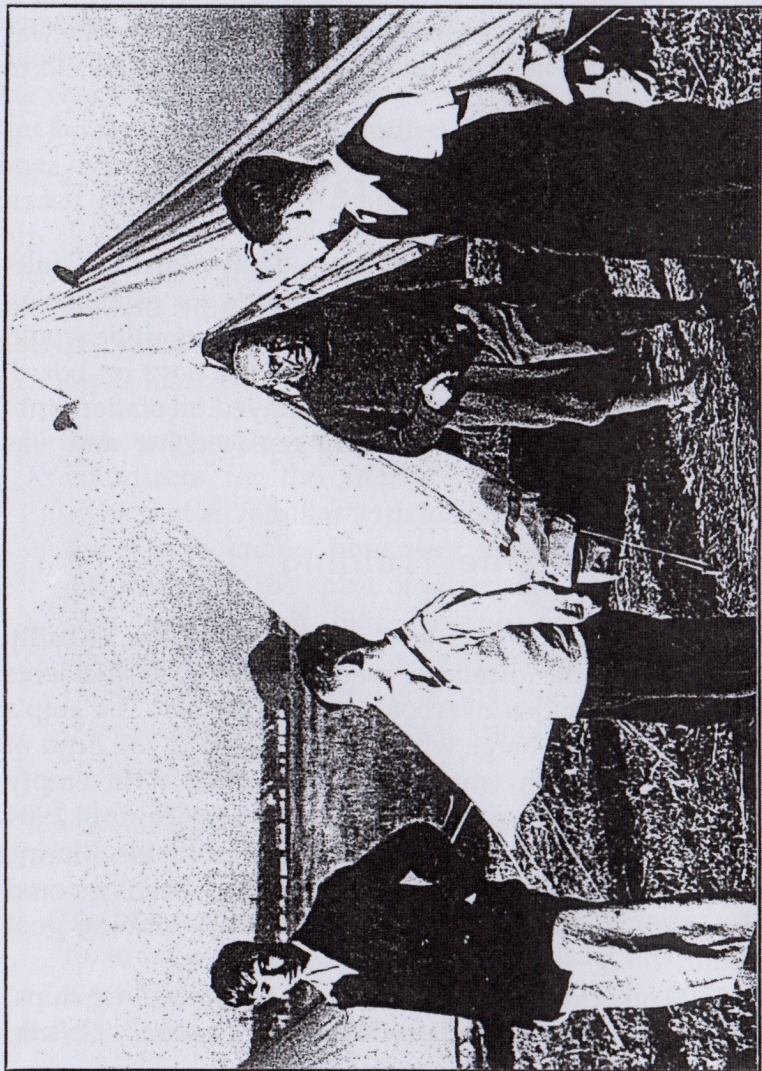
The Arethusa Training Ship

In 1873 a letter was received from Lady Burdett-Coutts offering the sum of five thousand pounds for establishing and fitting out a second training ship, if the committee would undertake to raise the funds to support the boys on board. Hence the training ship *Arethusa*. She stayed on station until July 18, 1933 when a new *Arethusa* replaced her and was moored at Upnor.

The Training

A high priority task was to teach the boys to swim, as sadly the minutes of the meetings were littered with incidents where boys had fallen overboard and drowned. The ship's Captain procured a barge which was moored to the head of the ship, filled with water, and kept afloat with empty barrels. This temporary pool remained in service until 1904 when part of the foreshore was bought from the Marine Society, whose training ship *Warspite* had been moored nearby since 1886, and a more permanent swimming pool was built.

By 1900 other charities were using these old sailing ships, and to name a few there was *Worcester*, *Cornwall*, *Goliath*,



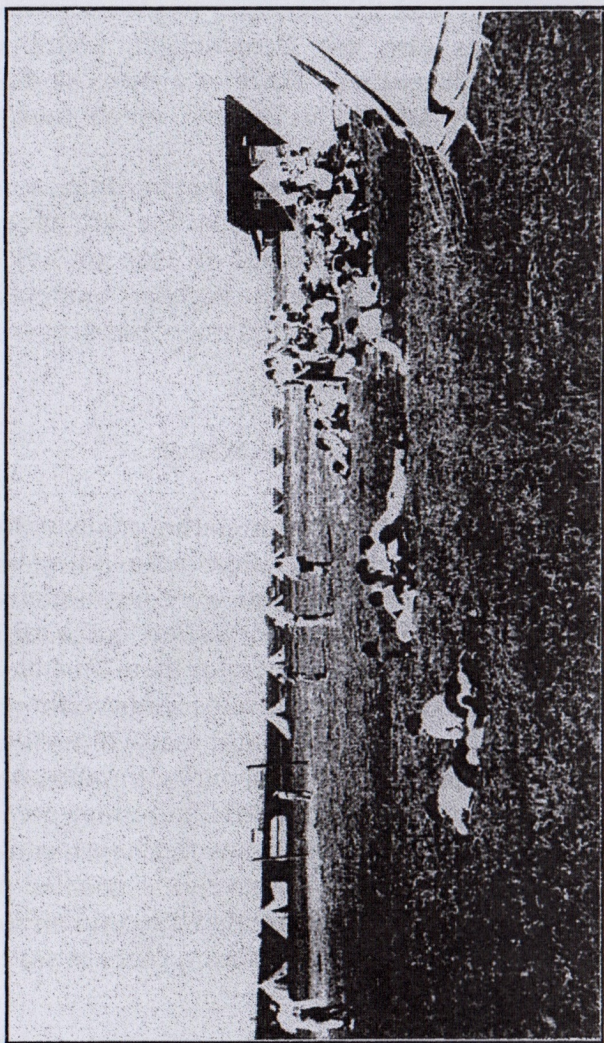
The Reverend Hutchinson's daily inspection of the boys' tents

Exmouth and *Warspite*. The *Worcester* trained officer cadets for the Merchant Navy and the *Cornwall* was a reformatory or prison. There was also the *Dreadnought*, which was a hospital ship for all seamen. There is a ward of the same name in St. Thomas' hospital in London, where seamen and their families are still treated today.

Boys were trained in all forms of seamanship, as well as cooking, carpentry, tailoring and in the art of making footwear. The Navies were pleased to take on any of the boys, as they were all trained to the highest standard and at the time of sailing ships they needed many hands to work the rigging.

Joining the Navy

Sometimes there were difficulties in getting some of the boys into the Navy. Boys who were too short or too puny were not considered fit for seagoing life and were recommended for emigration to the colonies where the society had a number of agents who would find employment for them. The Navy also refused to accept a boy for the Queen's service who was not in possession of a birth certificate and many of the boys had no idea of their parentage, let alone being in possession of a certificate to prove it. However, Lord Shaftesbury persuaded the first Lord of the Admiralty to allow the boys to join if they declared their age and agreed to serve for a specified period. It was eventually possible, for parents who could afford it, to pay for their sons to train on board for a career at sea.



The Normans Bay Camp pre 1940

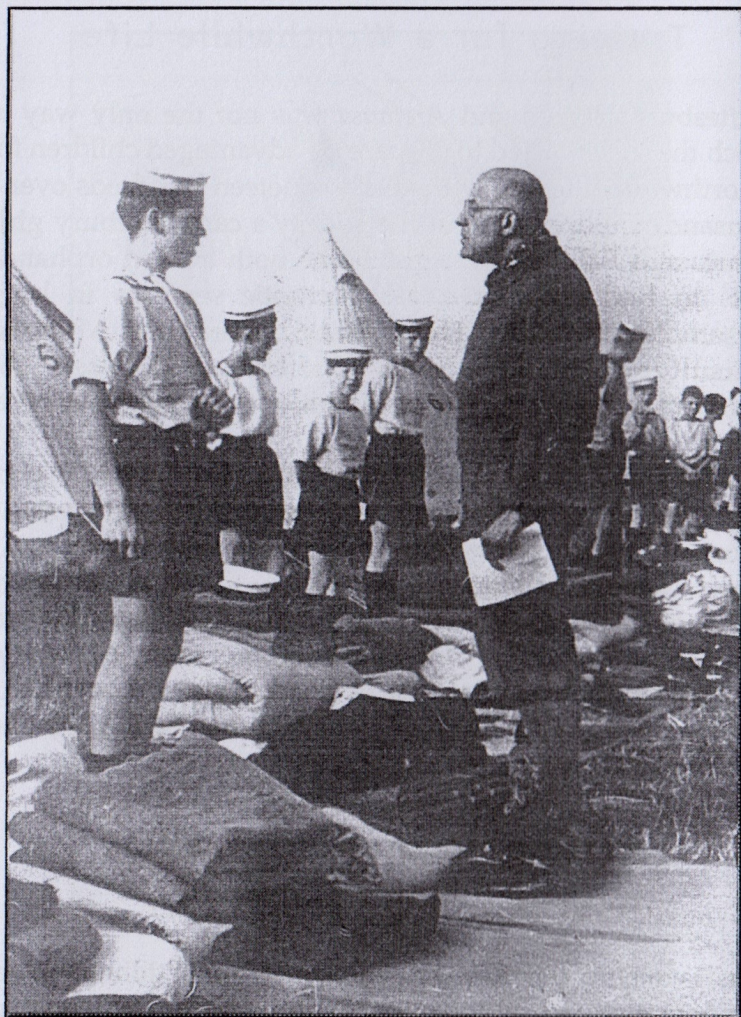
Training for a Worthwhile Life

Shaftesbury Homes and *Arethusa* was not the only way in which the society tried to prepare disadvantaged children for a worthwhile life and by the early nineteen hundreds over a thousand children were in the society's care. Sudbury girls homes and Ealing House girls home both trained orphaned girls to find employment as domestic servants in large households. Boys Farm Home, Bisley, trained boys to become agricultural workers and Shaftesbury House, 164 Shaftesbury Avenue became a London refuge and technical school.

In the late 1920s the Admiralty Hulks Committee was not happy with the number of boys training ships competing against each other for the few places available in seagoing careers (steam had taken over from sail, with the loss of many jobs). The ships were reduced to just *Arethusa*, *Warspite* and *Exmouth*. Because of the job shortage, many of the boys and girls without homes to go to, had to stay on board ship, or in the various homes during the summer, which meant no holiday all the year.

Setting up the Normans Bay Summer Camp

This is where the Rev. Hutchinson (from St Johns Wood, London) stepped in and with donations from wherever he could get them and a group of volunteers, he set up a



Kit Inspection

summer camp. It was decided that it should be in Normans Bay, which lay between Hastings and Eastbourne. At that time it was only a small village of 30 houses that were snuggled behind a large shingle bank, which protected them from the sea.

At that time Normans Bay was closed off by a farm gate at both ends of the village and the cattle were allowed to roam at will. The gate at the West End near what is now the site entrance was called 'Grandfathers Gate', after the old retired farmer who used to keep it in good working order. The only traffic using the dirt track road were the local tradesmen from Pevensey, whose speed was restricted to walking pace, due to the large potholes, so there was no danger from road traffic. The gates were demolished by the army tanks as they got ready for the D Day landings and were never replaced.

Hastings to the East would have been of great interest, seeing all the tall net sheds and the large fishing fleet, also to learn about 1066 and the battle.

To the West lay Eastbourne, famous for Beachy Head and the South Downs, where the many footpaths made it very interesting for walking and hiking.

To the North, miles and miles of countryside. What more could one want.

First a large hut was built some 80 feet by 40 feet, as a recreational hall and mess room. A stage was built at the East end for evening concerts. It also housed a tuck shop, a food store and a small post office. Then a cook house was built, with large coal burning kitchen ranges and several coppers for any food that needed boiling, such as potatoes, soups, and steamed puddings.



Reverend Hutch and a visiting clergy friend

A small marquee was used as a hospital, as there were always a few casualties. A local Doctor, Dr Farncome from Bexhill came out every day to tend them. A lamp room was next to be built, this was looked after by a big Irishman whom they called Paddy, who had to clean and fill some one hundred hurricane lamps every day. A new hut was built to serve as a little church and the Reverend Hutchinson, who was lovingly called 'Father Hutch', held a service every day. His own cabin was the top of a horse drawn delivery van.

Then there were the bell tents (ex first world war surplus) all around the perimeter of the field, ending with the wash room which was just a wind break of corrugated iron sheets, with some twenty wash basins on a bench and no roof! Next to this were the toilets. A four sided tin shed, boasting a roof. Inside was a row of seats over a very deep trench.

The Arrival of the Summer Visitors

It was usual for up to two hundred boys to arrive, some from training ships (*Arethusa*, *Warspite* and *Exmouth*) and some from the Shaftesbury Homes. Their day started with a good cold wash, hoisting the colours and morning prayers, followed by breakfast, after which the morning was theirs to do with exactly as they wished. There were so many things to do that at first some of the boys just stood there in bewilderment, as they had never known such freedom to do as they pleased, instead of living by orders. Realisation soon set in and usually it was a dash for the sea, which was only fifty yards from the camp boundary. Then there was football,



Hoisting the flag at morning assembly

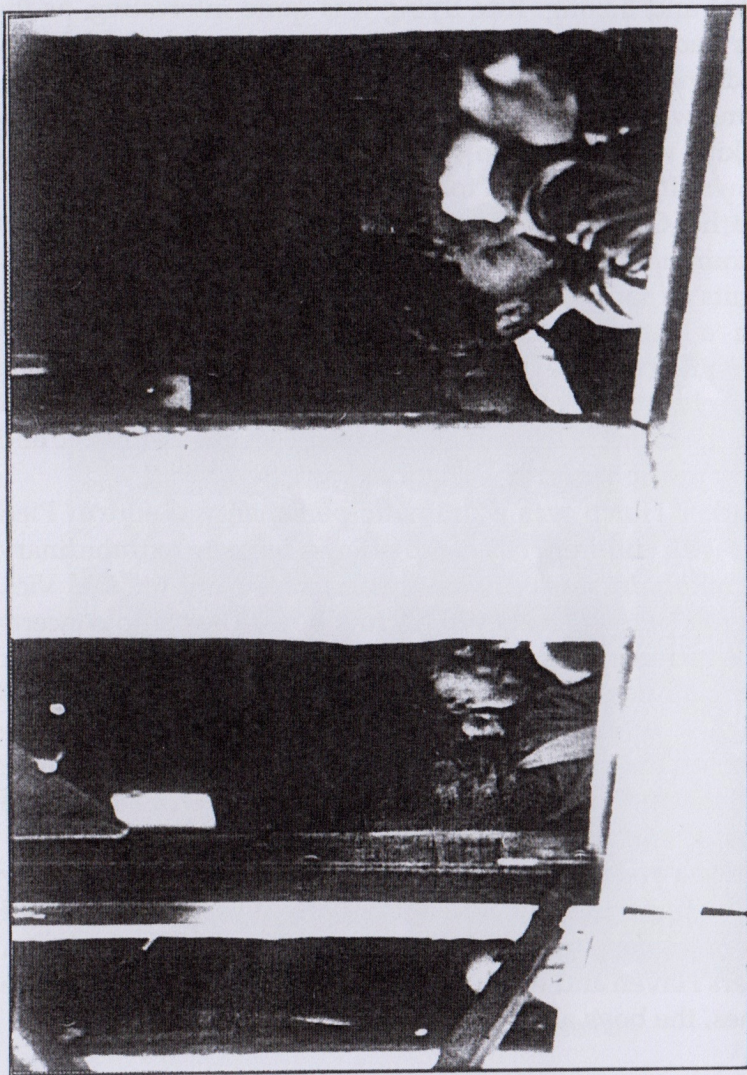
cricket and boxing. Kite flying was quite interesting, as the boys had to make their own kites from any material they could find.

One week Father Conway decided to build a six foot tall box kite, which flew too well and took a dozen boys to hold it down. It was deemed too dangerous and dismantled.

Father Conway was also a keen violinist and knowing that the training ships had their own bands, pounced on the new recruits as soon as they arrived to pick out the musicians to form a camp band, which meant that we were often entertained to an evening of music. I say *we* because all the village boys and girls were invited to everything that went on in the camp. The band also played background music and creepy music whilst ghost stories were being told.

Father Hutch was a dramatic personality, a sort of Pied Piper with children. His camp officers were an extraordinary mixture of University dons, actors (some from the Old Vic), students, parsons and even barrow boys. The camp concerts every evening were a mixture of music, melodrama and folk singing. Hutch himself was a fine actor who produced plays with most unlikely teams of professionals and amateurs. He was also a magnificent narrator of ghost stories and such like. Often the audience of wildly excited boys were known to rise en masse and pursue the villain off the stage.

Once a week a long paper-chase was held which usually lasted approximately one-and-a-half hours and spanned most of the Pevensy marshes. Sometimes they had to swim Wallers Haven and wade through some of the many drainage ditches, the boys always arrived back totally exhausted.



Boys at a concert in the big hut

Dinner was the midday meal and was always very hearty, with meat and all the usual vegetables. The sweet was more often than not a steamed pudding with custard.

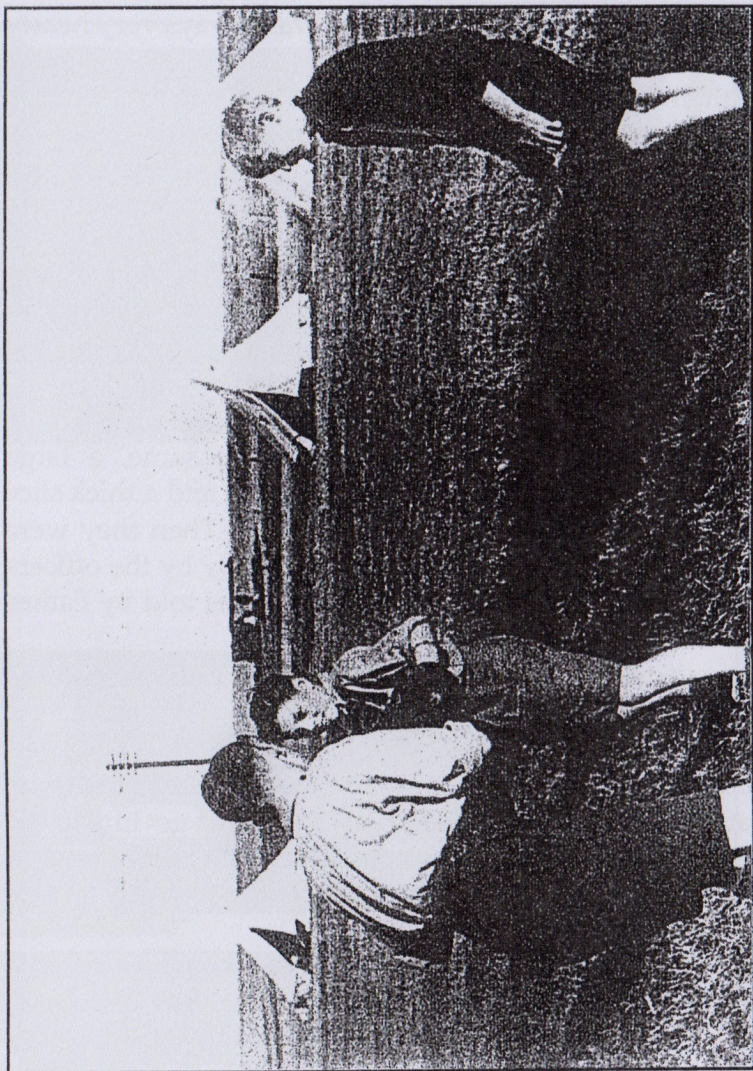
In the afternoon, the boys could either lay around, play games or go out in small groups with one of the officers. Some would go shopping, some just for a car ride as most of the officers had large cars, others liked country walks.

Tea was the bread, jam and cake variety, but always very wholesome.

During the evening all the boys had to fall in in front of the flag, when the last post was sounded and evening prayers were said, everyone would then retire to the big hut where supper was served. This was always the same, a large enamel mug of piping hot home-made soup and a thick slice of bread with lashings of dripping on top. Then they were entertained for the rest of the evening, mainly by the officers with sing-songs, stage shows or ghost stories told by Father Hutch or Louis Golding.

One evening during a concert the stage would be quickly cleared, a trestle table brought in, followed by an officer being carried in and laid on top. It was announced he had suffered a life threatening injury to his arm and had to be operated on immediately. There was no time to get him to the hospital so Jack and Bill Harrison (the cooks) had offered to do the amputation. During the operation absolute silence was to be observed.

The boys couldn't see what was happening as a large white sheet was hung in front of the table, but of course, when a bright light was switched on behind the 'doctors',



Boxing lessons

everyone could see in silhouette just what was going on. As there was no anaesthetic to deaden the pain, when Bill got his saw and started to cut off the patient's arm, blood curdling screams came from the officer. The Boy's hair stood on end! Red 'blood' poured from the wound into a tin bath placed conveniently under the table. Suddenly Bill cheered and held up the offending arm. Then as quickly as it had started, it ended with the sheet dropping to the floor, the officer jumping off the table waving **both** arms in the air and Bill holding aloft an artificial arm. Hair on heads dropped back to normal and the air of relief was so thick in the hut you could have cut it with a knife. The applause was deafening.

Finally it was back to the tents, completely tuckered out and ready for sleep, unless of course they were worried about the ghost in the ghost stories. Outside each tent was a hurricane lamp, already lit in case any of the boys needed to go to the toilet in the night.

The Convict Hunt!

Once a fortnight when the new holiday makers arrived, one of the first things they saw were a number of posters of either an escaped convict, or a murderer, purported to be in the area and instructions to report to the nearest officer if seen. At that time there used to be lots of tramps and vagabonds, usually dirty and scruffy, walking from workhouse to workhouse and passing by the camp, which made identifying the criminal very difficult, although the camp always made sure that the boys discovered him. Then with more than one



Evening prayers

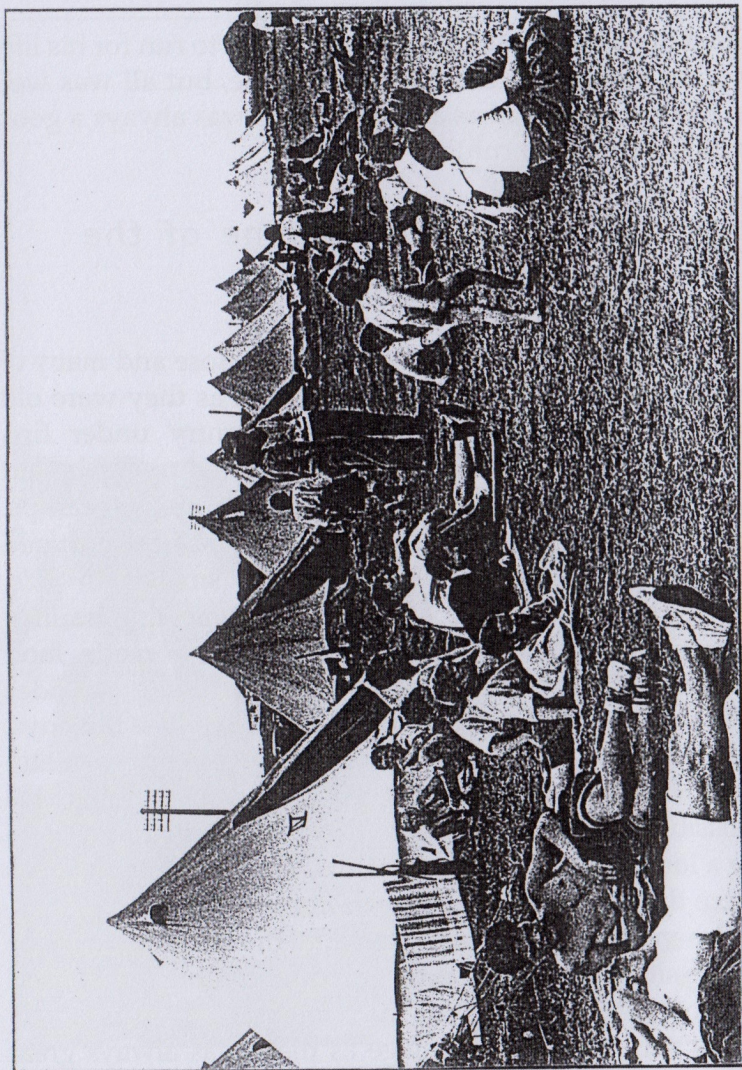
hundred boys in hot pursuit, the fellow had to run for his life, very often swimming out to sea to escape, but all was well when he was identified as an officer (this was always a good introduction to camp fun).

World War II: The Decline of the Boys Camp

When World War II came the camp had to close and many of the boys signed on into the forces as soon as they were old enough, some winning awards for gallantry under fire. When the war finally ended, the camp started up again, but it never seemed to have the excitement of the pre war camps. Perhaps it was because many of the boys had been fostered or adopted and the camps were much smaller in size. Perhaps everyone was still suffering from war-time trauma. Rationing and the use of coupons of course made food very difficult to obtain and petrol shortage made car rides impossible. There were no more tramps to confuse the boys, in their supposed hunt for convicts and the beaches were still covered with barbed wire and tank traps, so swimming was not possible. Many of the fields had been mined and were taking a long time to clear, so the boys were very restricted as to where they went, paper-chases were therefore out.

By the end of the 1940s the camp had finally closed and for a year the site was used for cattle grazing. The big hut housed sailing boats and caravans for the winter.

It was very sad for the village as there was always great excitement when the first contingent arrived at the beginning



Stand easy

of summer. All the village children were invited to the sports and shows, but as the saying goes, all good things come to an end. Thus ended what had been a very happy boys summer camp.

The Modern Camp Site

In 1950 the Normans Bay site was rented out to the Camping Club of Great Britain and Northern Ireland who used it as a touring tent site. The land was owned by a local resident, Mr Jim Smith who had his own mobile caravan site a few yards further down in the village.

1958 saw the site acquired on a more permanent basis. Although it was still privately owned, it was the first of what were called 'Club Holiday and Touring Sites', as opposed to 'Permanent Sites'.

1959 saw the official opening of the site by Canon C. W. Hutchinson (Father Hutch). Already there had been improvements. The big hut replaced by a very modern wooden recreation hall and the trench toilets by a toilet block with 20 chemical closets. Water to the site came from the very small bore pipe which supplied the village. So, during the camping high season it caused the village stand pipes to be left with just a small trickle.

1965 was a good year all round. The club was able to purchase the site outright and therefore could allow caravans to use it for the first time. The villages won their years of fighting to have mains drainage and a good supply of water put into all the houses. This enabled the club to bring its own

Camping in Normans Bay from the 1920s — A Short History



Ned Doswell (right) & Ted Percival



Bill & Lux Harrison



An early morning for two of the helpers

facilities right up to date and they installed flush toilets, washing machines, showers, etc.

It was in 1975 that the club decided to simplify the title and call it 'Club Sites'.

1976 saw the opening of a camp shop which sold a large selection of goods. The Camping Club were also able to put in 'hook up' electric points for visiting caravans.

Earlier I mentioned the road passing the camp was only a dirt track. This had been maintained by a small band of local residents for many years, working weekends filling in the potholes. They sometimes worked in pouring rain and sometimes in the freezing cold, but they were all dedicated to keeping the road open as this was the only way in and out of the village after the railway crossing closed for the night at 10 p.m.

As more traffic started to use the road, it was not possible for the locals to keep up the repairs and the club was asked to take over and in 1996 they had a tarmac surface put down.

Normans Bay Invaders

Although it has always been said that William landed at Pevensey in 1066, many historians now believe that because Pevensey was a heavily fortified area, it was more likely he would have landed his forces some two miles to the East in the Normans Bay area where he could have got ashore with little or no opposition.

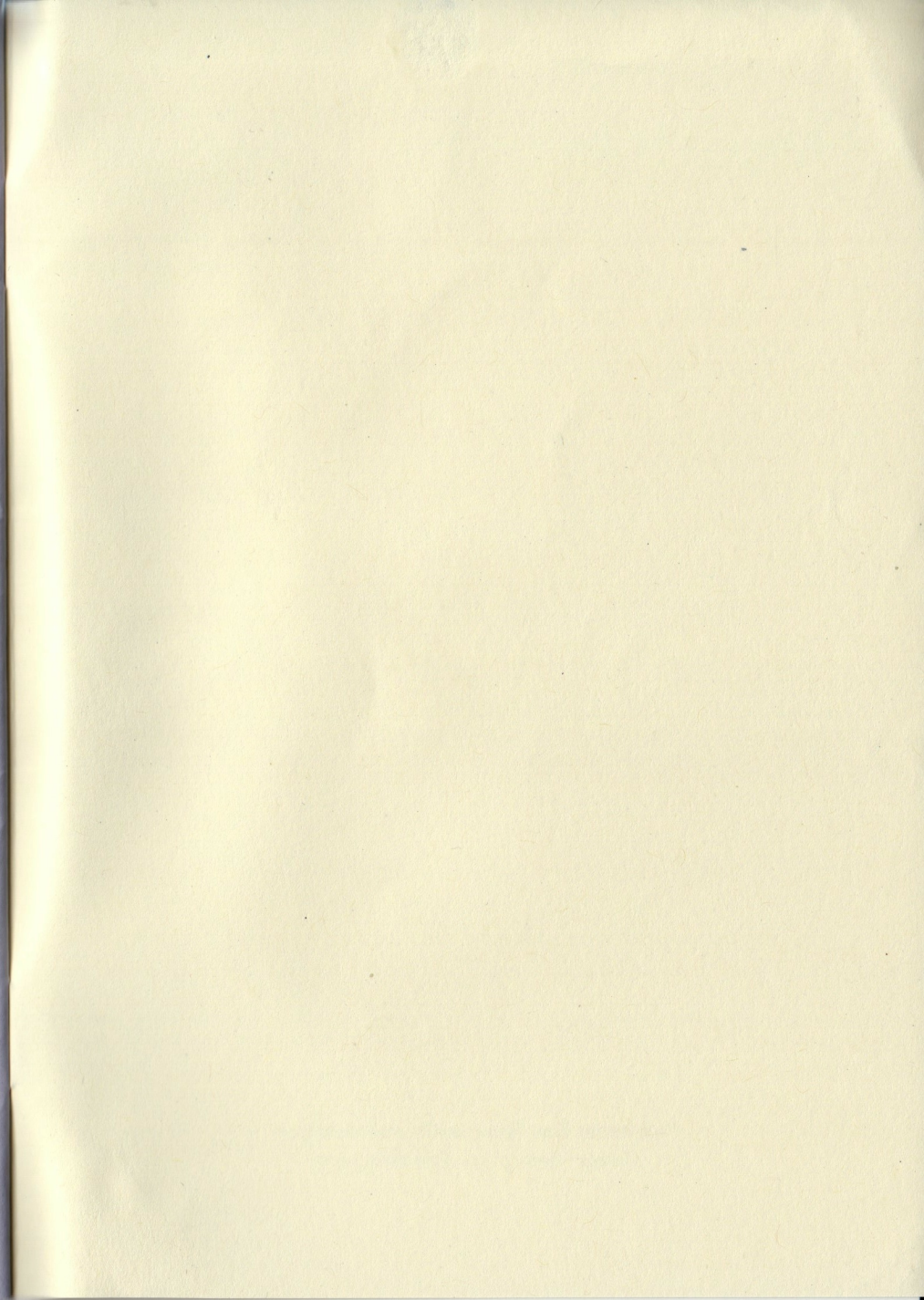
In the early Nineteenth century Martello towers were built as a defence against the threat of invasion by Napoleon and there is still one in the village.

Once more the 1800s saw the area being invaded, this time by gangs of smugglers. A force called 'Preventive Men' were formed to catch and jail them. Some preventive men and families were housed locally, mainly in the Martello towers. They fought some very bloody battles in and around the area and these men were the start of Customs and Excise.

In 1940 the village was taken over by the army. They installed 4.7 inch guns and searchlights to counter any invasion by Hitler.

1995 saw drug smugglers trying to land millions of pounds worth of drugs on our beaches. Happily they were caught by our modern Customs men.

Today, we have been invaded by holiday makers, but they seem to have a more friendly disposition.



Normans Bay Residents Association
Cover design by Bill Gregory